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ABSTRACT

This essay provides an analytic development of a philosophy of rhetoric which focuses its concern on social reality. According to this philosophy, the activity of the human mind invents symbolic constructions of reality. Primary socialization is interpreted as a rhetorical process which tends to maintain prevailing reality constructions. Subsequent communicative interactions (secondary socialization) perform the rhetorical functions of reinforcing or modifying the effects of primary socialization. Language and universes of discourse are the ultimate rhetorical products, which constitute the symbolic matrix that governs human action within a society. This philosophy of rhetoric as reality construction encompasses the traditional concerns of the field, recognizes the validity of conceptual and empirical research, and provides a perspective which may emerge as the new paradigm for research in the discipline. (AA)

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Rhetoric as Reality Construction

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RHETORIC AS REALITY CONSTRUCTION

This essay provides a preliminary analytic development of a "new" philosophy of Rhetoric. The focal concern of this philosophy is social reality. Social reality is considered a rhetorical product.[1] Rhetorical study seeks to understand and explain the creation, maintenance and transformation of social reality. Any communication process which contributes to these processes is a legitimate area for rhetorical study.[2] This essay will explain rhetorical reality construction with reference to the activity of the human mind which provides for the invention of symbolic constructions of reality, primary socialization as a rhetorical process which tends to maintain prevailing reality constructions, subsequent communicative interactions (secondary socialization) which perform the rhetorical functions of reinforcing or modifying the effects of primary socialization, language and universes of discourse, which as the ultimate rhetorical product, constitute the symbolic matrix that governs human action within a society.

I

Symbolization is the process by which the human mind forms symbolic reality constructs. It is the ultimate point of origin for rhetorical invention. It mediates our relationship to physical and social reality. Fundamentally, the mind is "symbolically active in the construction of all its universes of perception and discourse."[3] Because of this, "the world as we know it is a construction . . . to which the mind contributes as much by its moulding forms as the thing contributes by its stimuli."[4] The mind creates a symbolic construction of reality.

While the mind is necessarily symbolically active, variation is possible in reality construction. One need make only the most casual inspection of societies and cultures to witness an enormous variation in language, custom, dress, architecture, norms, attitudes and values. There are multiple social realities; all creations of the human mind and human interactions; all capable of transformation.

There is social relativity of knowledge or of what is taken to be "known" within various societies. The primitive and the modern live in different conceptual worlds. What is taken as "real" is socially defined. People will behave according to the reality constructions they hold. In a sense,

> Neither the Voudun gods nor libidinal energy may exist outside the world defined in their respective social contexts. But in these contexts, they do exist by virtue of social definition and are internalized as realities in the course of socialization. Rural Haitans are <u>possessed</u>, and New York intellectuals are <u>neurotic</u>. Possession and neurosis are thus constituents of both objective and subjective reality <u>in these contexts</u>.[5]

Thus, even neurosis and possession may be regarded as symbolically scripted behaviors.

The nature of human knowledge and social reality are inescapably symbolic and ultimately dependent on the powers of the human mind. Our knowledge of social reality is coded and communicated in various symbolic forms. Our symbolic constructions may accurately or inaccurately map physical reality as it exists independent of human conceptualization, but they provide the structure which allows the existence and creation of social reality. Rhetorically, the question of how symbols (especially

language) create and sustain order in social relations is of fundamental significance since "there is no necessary relationship between men imposed on them by blind nature. To the social and political and economic forms of relationship by which men live, there would seem to be no end."[6] Thus, the question is tantamount to how is order created from chaos.

Sociologist Burkhart Holzner suggests that social reality is the result of the "constructive stabilization of the fluent interactive process."[7] It is through symbolization that the constructs which stabilize the fluent interactive process are formed. And it is through communication that broadly shared systems of symbolization, such as language, which are resistant to idiosyncratic change, are stabilized. That is to say that within a given language community, an individual will be pressured to communicate according to the range of stabilized meanings of his language.

II

The rhetorical operation of language, which through human thought and action creates and stabilizes social reality, is complex in that the operation of single terms is dependent on their place in larger systems of symbolism which have been termed universes of discourse. Ultimately, "the symbolic universe is conceived of as the matrix of all socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings, the entire historic society and the entire biography of the individual are seen as events taking place within this universe."[8] In theory, "the symbolic universe provides a comprehensive integration of <u>all</u> discrete institutional processes. The entire society makes sense. Particular institutions and roles are legitimated by locating them in a comprehensively meaningful world."[9] A society is an empirical manifestation of a universe of discourse and may be understood in terms of

its universe of discourse.

The universe of discourse may be viewed as "A system of relevances and typifications . . . part of the social heritage . . . it functions as both a scheme of interpretation and as a scheme of orientation for each member of the in-group."[10] That such a system can be shared is significant in that it facilitates social interaction. Though "interaction is always a tentative process, a process of continuously testing the conception one has of the role of the other,"[11] a shared system of role constructions and expectations provide one "with the option of responding to that classification rather than the attributes of the individual."[12]

Up to this point, universes of discourse have been discussed in a highly general manner. Space will not allow a full explication of the concept, yet greater specificity can be provided with reference to a particular document in American history which can be considered a sector of the prevailing universe of discourse of our society. That document is the Constitution of the United States of America. As Kenneth Burke points out, a constitution sets up an "environment for future acts."[13] The Constitution of the United States is the symbolic matrix which provides for the establishment of a political system. The Constitution acts as an ideology. That is as "a limited aspect of the interpretive order of faiths and beliefs, namely, those reality constructs and values which serve to legitimate the claims for power and prestige and the activities of groups and their members."[14] It is in this manner that the U.S. Constitution functions. Note that

> National identification in American was achieved by the adoption of abstract, universal ideas . . . The permanent influence of this system of ideas and values on the course of American history--the fixation of an ideological attitude--was

> due to the fact that the American people considered themselves a new kind of society. The very existence of the nation was bound up with the maintenance of those principles of social and political organization.[15]

The statement of these "universal ideas" is contained in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. But it is the Constitution which creates the political structure of the nation. The Constitution provides the ideology which creates roles and processes; President, Vice-President, Senator, Representative, Supreme Court Justice, election, veto, impeachment; the Constitution defines rights and delegates responsibilities. Its rhetoric provides the basic direction of and justification for the American government.

III

In order to exist, a society faces the rhetorical task of maintaining a certain order of social reality against the competition of alternatives. This means concretely that "every society must discipline its members; persuading them to observe the accepted forms and dissuading them from pursuing conflicting objectives."[16] The task of reality maintenance is necessary since "a culture can function efficiently only if there is order and predictability in social life. We must <u>know</u>, within reasonable limits, what behavior to expect from others, what they expect from us, and what kind of society our children should be prepared to live in."[17] In upholding a pattern of social life, a society is engaged in the process of social control. The primary modality of social control is the socialization process. Social reality is reflexive, and new members are socialized in terms of the existing realities of their time. Thus, they tend to view

their social reality simply as "the way it is." Indeed, "the individual must become psychologically organized in a socialization process."[18] New members of a community will be expected to learn "the way it is" and act accordingly.

Social reality, though created and stabilized by human symbolic interaction, has an empirically observable existence. Parts of social reality confront the individual in their empirical manifestations. Social institutions, such as churches, governments, the police or armed forces are observable in their existence and function. Though such institutions are dependent on social supports for their continuing existence, they are minimally effected by the solitary individual. For the individual cannot simply wish them away; as long as others support the institution, its external existence is persistent. Moreover, these institutions exercise a coercive power on the individual "by the sheer force of their facticity and through control mechanisms."[19] In its objective existence broadly held, social realities act to force the new members to accept an act in terms of the rhetorically prevailing reality constructions. As Kenneth Burke puts it, "Insofar as the individual mind is a group product, we may look for the same patterns of relationship between the one and the many in any historical period."[20]

In the socialization process, through which the child learns "patterns of relationship," language is of primary importance. The child must learn more about language than just vocabulary and grammar. He must learn rhetorical patterns of language which direct thought and action. These rhetorical patterns provide motivational and interpretive schemes. Thus, the child might learn that:

Brave little boys do not cry.

Brave little boys are good.

All little boys should be brave.

Little boys are either brave or cowardly.

From these rhetorical equations, the little boy who is hurt will attempt to control his tears in order to be "brave and good." He will regard other little boys who cry as "cowardly and not good." Those who cry are not acting as they "should." Without language molded into stable rhetorical patterns, these reactions would be impossible. Only through rhetoric can men justify or legitimatize their activities. Terms are linked such that one set of terms is justified by another. (Thus, "not crying" in order "to be good.") In this way, systems of relationship between terms develop.

The patterns of relationship the child learns in socialization is restricted, since the child has no exposure to alternative patterns. He has no choice as to his significant others and "his identification with them is quasi-automatic . . . his internalization of their particular reality is quasi-inevitable."[21] The child does not regard his internalized reality as particular or isolated. He regards it as general and universal--the only existent or conceivable world. The reality rhetorically constructed in primary socialization is psychologically certain and accomplishes the most important confidence trick society plays on the individual--"to make appear as necessity what is, in fact, a bundle of contingencies and, thus, to make meaningful the accident of his birth."[22]

It is through the internalization of rhetorical language patterns in socialization that social realities are created anew in the minds of the young and, thus, perpetuated. It is these patterns that posits the order of social life. Ultimately, "each socialized person . . . is a society

in miniature. Once he has incorporated the culture of the group, it becomes his perspective, and he can bring this frame of reference to bear upon all new situations he encounters."[23] In this view, "society consists of the images which its members have of it, their beliefs about social reality, their view of each other, of their roles, or the roles of their partners, their knowledge of groups, organizations and of institutions that have some importance for them."[24] These images are necessarily symbolic, ultimately linguistic and rhetorically communicated. Men are guided in their social behavior by language constructions internalized through social interaction. A social situation cannot be understood merely by locating it in space and time, it must be understood in the terms people apply to it which stabilize its meaning. Men do not act directly in response to their environmental situation, rather they react to what they conceive that situation is or means. This assignment of meaning is guided by the rhetorically prevailing reality constructions.

Just as reality constructions are internalized in primary socializations, they must be maintained in consciousness by ongoing rhetorical interaction. In the process of reality maintenance, conversation is of primary importance. In conversation, reality maintenance is usually implicit rather than explicit. Thus, "an exchange such as, 'Well, it's time for me to get to the station,' and 'Fine, darling, have a good day at the office' implies an entire world within which these apparently simple propositions make sense. By virtue of this implication, the exchange confirms the subjective reality of this world."[25] The confirmation of subjective reality by the implication of conversation is possible only insofar as the statement is understood and interpreted in terms of the universe of discourse which the individual had previously internalized. It is only within the broader universe of discourse that implications from statements may be drawn.

Another factor involved in reality maintenance is that a loss of faith in prevailing reality constructions without the development of an alternative leaves the individual "lost, at loose ends, without orientation."[26] One's universe of discourse structures social reality and on the boundry on this rhetorical structure is confusion and meaninglessness. One who has lost faith in his universe of discourse cannot be secure in his knowledge of self or others. The "world" is no longer meaningful. Yet, man strives to find meaning to order his life activities. And a lack of faith in any symbolic construction of reality is a causative factor in psychological disorder.[27] Hypothetically even if such a total loss of faith occurs, the individual will still utilize the prevailing universe of discourse in his social interactions. Put simply, mere loss of faith provides no alternative universes to direct action. Thus, even the disenchanted and alienated do not immediately threaten the symbolic universe of a society. As long as they act in terms of prevailing reality constructions, they sustain the system. However, they provide fertile grounds for those rhetoricians who could provide developed alternative constructions. In general, the symbolic universe is self-maintaining due to its domination of rhetorical communications within the society.

IV

Despite the relative stability of social reality due to the processes of reality maintenance, it is possible to rhetorically reconstruct and, thus, transform social reality. The symbol producing capacities of the

human mind which make possible the initial construction of social reality also make possible its reconstruction. The reconstruction of social reality involves changes in the prevailing universe of discourse. There are a number of types of change which are possible. The type of change which seems most frequent is the expansion of the size and structure of the universe of discourse. In virtually all areas of human knowledge, the sub-universes of discourse are expanding as new and more detailed constructions are developed and communicated. Generally, these sub-universes are prevailing only within certain academic disciplines, and only small portions of these sub-universes filter into the generally shared universe of discourse of the society. Nonetheless, even if this expansion of the prevailing universe provides for the further general expansion, should the society seek to incorporate greater segments from a sub-universe. Any member of the society may learn the more detailed symbols and structure of a sub-universe of discourse. After all the "social learning process, while slow in the young infant becomes extremely rapid . . . a normal alert person can learn over a hundred new meanings within the space of an hour."[28]

Other changes in the universe of discourse involve more fundamental changes in vocabulary and pattern. These changes tend to occur in response to "problems." Generally, the universe of discourse is simply taken for granted until a problem occurs which cannot be solved by it. When this occurs, the existence of the problem may generate the construction of a new symbolic solution which alters the universe of discourse. This will

depend on the significance of the problem. Significant problems may produce reality shocks. Reality shock is related to reality construction in that:

> Sometimes the reality shock may be extremely threatening. One is compelled, at least momentarily, to adopt a stance of utter doubt toward the natural attitude and toward natural reality. In fact, reality may collapse, and it must then be reconstructed in a sometimes frantic search for an appropriate new perspective.[29]

Such a severe reality shock represents a crisis in which we experience the boundaries or paradoxes of our universe of discourse. Reality shocks may affect only a portion of the universe of discourse and require only the addition of a qualifier. Thus, a society in which the prevailing universe of discourse states that "one should not engage in violence" may add the qualification of "except in self-defence" if it finds itself surrounded by aggressive societies.

Another type of change is one in the interpretation of a term, that is its place and relationship to other terms in the universe of discourse. Change of interpretation means that a term is redefined and linked to different terms than at some previous moment. Such a change will be illustrated with a consideration of the U.S. Constitution.

The illustration also provides an example of the potential of this philosophy of rhetoric to incorporate traditional rhetorical concerns and draw more explicit relationships to social reality. That diversity of interpretation concerning the Constitution has existed, is a historical commonplace. Yet, a key "victory" for a particular interpretation occurred with the passage of the Revenue Collection Bill of 1833. The clash between two interpretations involved a variety of speakers and issues. But the

most basic issue was a definition of the Constitution itself. Did the Constitution form a compact between the States or a consolidated government created by the people? This was the focal point of the controversy. Logically dependent upon it was the constitutional status of the doctrines of nullification and secession. John C. Calhoun and Daniel Webster were the primary antagonists on this issue. Historian Charles M. Wiltse indicates that:

> Calhoun based his case on the meaning of the Constitution for those who wrote and ratified it and, in these terms, his argument was basically sound, even though nullification itself was drawn from a Jeffersonian gloss rather than the literal text of the instrument. But Webster's interpretation was the only one compatible with the existence of a great national state, in a world everyday growing more nationalistic.[30]

Though Calhoun is generally conceded to have won the arguments, he did not win the votes. The Revenue Collection Bill was passed, and Calhoun's interpretation suffered its first serious legislative defeat. It was Webster's interpretation which prevailed, which was consentually validated and which threatened to defend itself by force. Calhoun recognized the effect of the passage of the bill in stating:

> It would be idle to attempt to disguise that the bill will be a practical assertion of one theory of the Constitution against another--the theory advocated by the supporters of the bill that ours is a consolidated government, in which the states have no rights, and in which, in fact, they bear the same relation as the counties do to the State; and against that view of the Constitution which considers it as a compact formed by the States and not between the indivi l citizens."[31]

Though the Revenue Collection Bill passed and with it the consolidated government interpretation became "official," Calhoun's interpretation of the Constitution did not die.

Throughout the Southern States it remained the dominant interpretation. In the North and West, the "official" interpretation prevailed. The existence of these divergent and partially contradictory interpretations of the Constitution indicated disunity within the society. Each interpretation congealed "into a reality in its own right which, by its very existence within the society, challenges the reality status of the other."[32] In the case where one universe is officially sanctioned, as was the case with Webster's interpretation following the passage of the Revenue Collection Bill, the alternative construction constitutes a threat to "the institutional order legitimated by the . . . 'official' definition of reality."[33] When two competing universes cannot become integrated via continuing negotiation, the proponents of either universe may attempt to <u>force</u> the proponents of the other to act according to the dictates of their definition of reality. The Revenue Collection Bill provided for the use of such force. It authorized the use of military force against any State attempting to nullify a Federal law. The Southern political leaders derogated the bill by calling it the Force Bill. Yet, the threat of force succeeded in gaining the compliance of South Carolina, who at the time, was the only Southern State openly threatening defiance. Note that South Carolina and the South, in general, did not endorse or accept the consolidation theory, but complied to avoid violence. Eventually, the South unified creating their own separate government constituted as a <u>compact between the States</u>. The objective realities thus created, destroyed the institutional order dictated by the official universe of discourse, and the resulting conflict was resolved by force. The objective aspects of the "new" reality (the

government, Army, currency, flags) were destroyed, and the official reality reestablished after a period aptly termed the Reconstruction.

A final source of reality reconstruction is due to the systematic character of a universe of discourse. As a system, it is not entirely stable, and change in any sector of the system may facilitate or produce changes elsewhere in the system. For example, the Protestant Reformation had ramifications that were political and economic, as well as religious. Thus,

> In the first Protestant societies--England, Scandinavia, the Netherlands and later in the United States--perhaps even before the full development of a new motivational orientation, the central symbolic and political sphere and the basic relations between the political and social spheres were transformed through the incorporation of Protestant values and symbols. This not only reinforced the existing autonomy of these spheres, but created new bases of political obligations and more flexible political institutions.[34]

And presumably from this greater flexibility, modernization in economic and industrial sectors was facilitated.

That a successful rhetorical movement may have significant ramifications beyond its intended parameters, is not predicted nor explained in either classical or other comtemporary rhetorical theories. Therefore, the perspective of rhetoric as reality construction makes a unique theoretical contribution in providing that such change may be accounted for due to the systemic interactions within a universe of discourse. The perspective raises new and challenging questions for the critic and theorist in determining the complexity, interdependency, organization and growth potential of a universe of discourse, or the constraints provided by a universe of discourse in causing susceptibility or resistance to persuasion in a particular rhetorical situation. The specification of relations within

a universe of discourse or criticism illustrating the operations of those relations would significantly advance our understanding and might profitably occupy several generations of scholars. Moreover, laboratory and naturalistic experimentation could contribute through executing designs utilizing additional and dependent measures not directly related to the issue of a persuasive message and attempting to discover concurrent changes in attitude, belief or opinion.

Kenneth Burke suggest that "even in the 'best possible of worlds,' the need for symbolic tinkering would continue."[35] This need for reality reconstruction occurs because of the inherent imperfection of the empirical manifestations of symbolic constructions, to the effects of historical progression, incident or accident.

Though language and the prevailing universe of discourse tend to channel the thought process within a society, it is possible to think new thoughts, to create new symbols and through communication, to share these inventions. The "new" may be a reordering of the old. The "new" is not the normal. The vocabulary of any developed language provides opportunities for vocabulary relationships far beyond the relatively few combinations evident in the prevailing universe of discourse. New combinations provide new verbal equations for human thought and action. Though language and the prevailing universe of discourse tend to constrain thought, they do not preclude the creative acts of rhetorical vision. As Robert Kennedy quoting Shaw repeatedly expressed it, "Some men see things as they are and ask why. I dream of things that never were and ask why not."

V

In summary, this essay has attempted to provide a preliminary analytic

development of a "new" philosophy of rhetoric which focuses its concern on social reality. Processes involved in the creation, maintenance and reconstruction of social reality were discussed. The philosophy of rhetoric as reality construction offers a rich new perspective for research in the field. It encompasses the traditional concerns of the field, recognizes the validity of conceptual and empirical research and provides a transcendent perspective which may emerge as the new paradigm for research in the discipline.

[1]The reader is encouraged to draw a sharp distinction between physical and social reality. Physical reality is material and exists independently of human symbolization. Social reality is symbolic (though it may have empirical manifestations, it is not in essense material) and cannot exist independent of ongoing human symbolic interaction.

[2]The scope of rhetorical study sanctioned by this perspective is broader than that of the classical, neo-Aristotelian, or contemporary rhetorical traditions. In defense of this broader scope it should be noted that this perspective encompasses traditional concerns, approximates the actual scope of current research within the field in a focus which only recently has begun to emerge, (see Lloyd Bitzer. "The Rhetorical Situation." Philosophy and Rhetoric. (January 1968), 1-14., David M. Berg. "Rhetoric, Reality and Mass Media." QJS. (October 1972), 255-263., Ernest G. Bormann. "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality." QJS. (December 1972), 396-407., and Stanley Deetz. "Words without Things: Toward a Social Phenomenology of Language." QJS. (February 1973), 40-51.), and is analytically necessary to explain the existence and change of social realities.

[3]Carl H. Hamburg. Symbols and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer. (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1956), p. 48.

[4]Will Durant. The Story of Philosophy. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 206.

[5]Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. The Social Construction of Reality. (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1966), p. 162.

[6]Lee Thayer. "Communication Systems," in The Relevance of General Systems Theory. Edited by Ervin Laszlo. (New York: George Braziller, 1972), p. 106.

[7]Burkhart Holzner. Reality Construction in Society. (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1968), p. 72.

[8]Berger and Luckmann, p. 89.

[9]Berger and Luckmann, p. 95.

[10]Alfred Schutz. On Phenomenology and Social Relations. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 120-121.

[11]Ralph H. Turner. "Role-Taking: Process versus Conformity," in Human Behavior and Social Processes. Edited by Arnold M. Rose. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), p. 23.

[12]Robert F. Terwilliger. Meaning and Mind. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 272.

[13]Kenneth Burke. A Grammar of Motives. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p. 362.

[14]Holzner, p. 144.

[15]Yehoshua Arieli. Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 29.

[16]Don Martindale. Social Life and Cultural Change. (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1962), p. 43.

[17]Paul B. Horton and Chester L. Hunt. Sociology. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 150.

[18]A. Irving Hallowell. Culture and Experience. (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 5.

[19]Berger and Luckmann, p. 57.

[20]Kenneth Burke. Permanence and Change. (Los Altos: Hermes Publishing Co, 1954), p. 159.

[21]Berger and Luckmann, p. 124.

[22]Berger and Luckmann, p. 124.

[23]Tamatsu Shibutani. "Reference Groups and Social Control." in Human Behavior and Social Processes. Edited by Arnold M. Rose. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), p. 132.

[24]Holzner, p. 72.

[25]Berger and Luckmann, p. 140.

[26]Jose Ortega Y Gasset. Man and Crises. Translated by Mildred Adams. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), p. 86.

[27]Joseph B. Fabry. The Pursuit of Meaning. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968); or Victor E. Frankel. Man's Search for Meaning. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962.)

[28]Rose, p. 9.

[29]Holzner, pp. 11-12

[30]Charles M. Wiltse. John C. Calhoun. (New York: The Bobbs Merrill Company, 1949), p. 194.

[31]John C. Calhoun. in Great Debates in American History. Edited by Marion Mills Miller. (New York: Current Literature Publishing Company, 1913), p. 102.

[32]Berger and Luckmann, p. 98.

[33]Berger and Luckmann, p. 98.

[34]S.N. Eisenstadt. "Transformation of Social, Political and Cultural Orders in Modernization," in Comparative Perspectives on Social Change. Edited by S. N. Eisenstadt. (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1968), pp 275-276.

[35]Kenneth Burke. Attitudes Toward History. (Los Altos: Hermes Publications, 1959), p. 179.